

*Precious Resource:*  
*An Analysis on the Workload of Stage Managers*  
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## **PREFACE**

Contradictory to labor acts that formed unions within the United States, the workers still permeate an unhealthy culture of exhaustion and burnouts for the sake of professional dignity and pride; especially in the world of performing arts where a majority of stage managers uphold themselves to a high pedestal of overwork with lacking support. In this analysis, I argue that the career of stage management has laid out circumstances where one feels like they must remain complacent in the ongoing sacrifices they make to fulfill the “show must go on” motto. This paper analyses the possible origins of this overwork culture that America created and flourished under capitalism which later adapted to meet the demands of current theatrical productions. Under these demands are faced by stage managers whom are asked to give a lot with little backing.

The **INTRODUCTION** goes over the origins of choosing this topic and why it holds relevance to today’s stage managers.

**DISCLAIMER** gives the background of the research implemented to write this paper and its limitations to describing the overwork conditions of everyone in the American stage management community.

**OVERWORK CULTURE** is a brief history recall connecting the emergence of capitalism and its connection to overworking. It goes deeper in the effects of overworking on the human body and lifestyle. Here we are introduced to following terms that will be used throughout the paper.

**THE SHOW MUST GO ON** is the connection from overwork culture to the specific culture within the performing arts and why it persists to remain.

**DEMOGRAPHICS** goes into the survey research and results that asked stage managers about their experiences in dealing with overworking in the theatrical world. This will also include interview inserts to further support the claim using stage managers' responses.

**AEA PORTION** will focus on the stage manager's relationship with Equity and how efficient this union is in recognizing the needs of stage managers.

**OVERWORK CULTURE IS PERSISTENT** explains how the community reacts to the current system and if they challenge or resist it.

**TEMPORARY SOLUTIONS** and **ACTION STEPS** are tips from stage managers in dealing with stress and preventing overwork. It is followed by real life events that support raising awareness and negotiations.

**CONCLUSION** is the overall takeaway from this topic and how we can move forward as a stage management community.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

On April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019, an article titled *Overworked Staff and Performing Arts: Let's Not Pretend We're Okay* is published online discussing a rare and often difficult to discuss topic to light; the plight of exhausted and overworked production professionals in theatre.

That same day, a stage manager posts this article on a private Facebook group for AEA stage managers with the question "What are your most egregious examples of "overwork" in Stage Management?". From then on, it is the most popular post in the group with 74 responses from stage managers detailing their frustrations and exasperations from "difficult directors" to unprotected contracts to added responsibilities beyond stage management to low pay but high work ratios and more. This article lights a fuse within this community to share their darkest experiences. People leave passages about their terrible shortcomings in various projects,

complaints about certain contracts, and disparities in their team. These comments are then replied by people who offered solutions, sorrow, and empathy. It bonds us over the hardships that stage managers feel on productions and it make us realize how common this feeling of being overworked was.

Ideally, this thesis could help further the conversation and bring awareness to what is assumed to be a common thought, but not an outright challenged spoken word. Comments from the Facebook Group will be inserted into this paper, however, due to the nature of anonymous, it can't be cited or linked.

### **DISCLAIMER**

Despite numerous articles and research on the culture of overworking in the corporate world, the same cannot be said for the world of theater or performing arts, let alone stage management specifically. Much of the observations in this analysis on the stage manager perspective are based on a self-created survey that cover areas such as overworking, overtime, and the working environment of theater. The self-created *Stage Managers and Overwork Survey* has recordings from 79 (AEA and non-union) stage managers. In addition, with the *2015-2016 Theatrical Season Report*<sup>1</sup> notation that 17,834 AEA members worked and, on average, 936 members worked on SM/ASM contracts each week, the total number of stage managers present in the United States is still not determined. With an unknown number of stage managers both AEA or non-union (not to mention film, dance, opera, or event work), this study will never fully represent all of the perspectives and practices of every American stage manager. However, it can continue the conversation and examination of the overwork culture within the performing world

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<sup>1</sup> Actor's Equity.<https://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/annualstudy/1516Report.pdf>

through the lens of stage managers. With that said, the focus area of stage managing that is discussed in this paper is within the theatrical world.

### **OVERWORK ORIGINS:**

Why would stage managers overwork themselves? Is it inevitable in this career path? Is it a choice? Actually, why would anyone overwork themselves to begin with? Outside of the performing arts, people didn't simply decide to overwork themselves.

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*<sup>2</sup> is a study published in 1905 and it examines the relationship between the ethics of Protestantism and the emergence of the spirit of modern capitalism. Weber first observes a correlation between being Protestant and being involved in business and declares his intent to explore religion as a potential cause of the modern economic conditions. He argues that the modern spirit of capitalism saw profit as an end in itself and that pursuing profit was virtuous. Weber's goal is to understand the source of this spirit. He turns to Protestantism for a potential explanation. Protestantism offers a concept of the worldly "calling," and gives worldly activity a religious character. Rooted in the Protestant work ethic, work is not something you do to get what you want, but the work itself is all. Any method or gift that optimizes your day, allowing you to fit in even more work, is not just desirable but inherently good. This perspective views work as a necessity in everyday life and that more work is a fulfillment. There is no focus on the end result or reward.

This Protestant work ethic alone cannot explain the need to pursue work in the emerging capitalist world. Weber turns to look at other religious ideas of groups such as the Calvinists that could have played a role in creating the capitalistic spirit. One branch of Protestantism,

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<sup>2</sup> Max Weber; Peter R. Baehr; Gordon C. Wells (2002). *The Protestant ethic and the "spirit" of capitalism and other writings*. Penguin. ISBN 978-0-14-043921-2.

Calvinism, believes in predestination--that God has already determined who is saved and damned. As Calvinism develops, there is a societal need for signs from above to know whether one is actually saved or damned. Calvinists look to their success in worldly activity for those signs. Thus, they come to value profit and material success as signs of God's favor. Yet they can't come to value profit and material success without the belief that you must work hard and smart consistently to achieve what was God's favor. Weber argues that this new attitude broke down the traditional economic system, paving the way for modern capitalism; to make money, you must always work hard. However, with this new attitude, modern capitalism subsequently disowns its religious backgrounds to claim money as a goal in itself. No longer is hard work ethnic to reap rewards subservient any other goals, i.e. religious ones. Once capitalism emerges, the Protestant roots are no longer necessary, and the Calvinist ethic take on a life of its own under its new name. Eventually, with the subscription to applying wages to work hours or produce and using those wages to fuel daily survival or life prosperity, modern economic activity become reliant on the spirit of capitalism. With work-for-wages tied into life-comfortability, it creates the assumption that the only value that we have as human beings is our productive capability – our ability to work, rather than our humanity.

Conditions in this postindustrial economy increasingly demands more commitment from workers<sup>3</sup>. In fact, workers themselves are reluctant to stop working and take time for their families or leisure<sup>4</sup>. They take it upon themselves given the demands of their jobs and their life needs to perpetuate a culture of working hard, which soon became overworking with the

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<sup>3</sup> Perrons, D. (2003). The new economy and the work-life balance: Conceptual explorations and a case study of new media. *Gender, Work, & Organization*, 10, 65-93.

<sup>4</sup> Hochschild, A.R. (1997). *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.



fluctuating factors such as wages, inflation, demands of the company, skillsets, employment, etc. To understand what overwork culture and its relevance in this paper, these terms need to be defined.

### **OVERWORK TERMINOLOGY**

**Culture** is an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that were characteristic of the members of any given society. Culture is the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people think, say, do, and make — its systems, attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation.<sup>5</sup>

**Overwork** is the expression used to define the cause of working too hard, too much, or too long. It can be also related to the act of working beyond one's strength or capacity, causing physical and/or mental distress in the process.<sup>6</sup>

There is no official definition of **overwork culture**, but by combining the separate definitions of culture and overwork, a sufficient definition arises. **Overwork culture** is an integrated system within the work environment where employees or members of the work environment are learned to work beyond one's capacity. Within overwork culture, there are systems in place that either encourages or dissipates the tolls of overworking:

**Overtime** is working time in excess of a standard day to which a wage is pay to compensate.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> L. Robert Kohls, *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*. 4th ed. Nicholas Brealey, 2001

<sup>6</sup> "Overwork". *The Free Dictionary*. Retrieved February 1, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> "Overtime." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/overtime>. Accessed 1 Feb. 2020.

**Voluntary overtime** is work which the employer may ask the worker to do but which the worker is not required to work unless he agrees at the time to do so.<sup>8</sup>

**Compulsory overwork** is that where the individual had no choice but to work more than their capacity. In other words, compulsory overwork is the lack of control that workers exercise over the boundary between work time and private time.<sup>9</sup>

These terms will be used freely throughout this paper to showcase examples of overwork culture in the theatrical world.

### **CONSEQUENCES OF OVERWORK CULTURE**

The University of Michigan estimates in the journal of the American Association of Occupational Health Nurses that the total cost of depression at work is as high as \$44 billion.<sup>10</sup> They point out that healthcare workers have focused much attention on the workplace risk factors for heart disease, cancer, obesity, and other illnesses, but little emphasis on the risk factors for depression, stress, negative changes in personal life, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships.

The emotional impacts of overwork could vary, depending on the amount of work, levels of pressure and competition in the workspace. Employees who worry about not getting work finished and keeping up a fast pace could feel like they were drowning in their workload, a feeling that manifests itself in chronic stress and anxiety, which could hebetate their spirit and create tension in personal and work relationships. This behavior continues even if the worker becomes aware that it is personally harmful — even harmful to the quality of the work. The

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<sup>8</sup> Steven, Liz. "Employment Law Update – Holiday Pay and voluntary overtime". *Birketts*. September 27, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Lung, Shirley. "Overwork and overtime" *mckinneylaw.iu.edu*. May 26, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> De, Graaf J. *Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America*. Readhowyouwant.com Ltd, 2011. Print.

stress that goes along with working too much had been shown to lead to substance abuse, sleep disorders, anxiety, and ultimately to physical problems. Forced overtime, heavy workloads, and frenetic work paces give rise to debilitating repetitive stress injuries, on-the-job accidents, over-exposure to toxic substances, and other dangerous work conditions.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned, one of the key indicators that an individual is being overworked, and not merely challenged, is if work-related stress begins to take a toll on their physical health and general lifestyle. It is easy to distinguish different types of physical symptoms, such as getting sick frequently due to a weakened immune system, depression, and insomnia. All these symptoms could cause more fatigue-related errors at work and affect their personal lives; i.e. burnouts, when a person is exhausted, drained, and left with nothing to give.

### **HOW THIS CULTURE SPILLED INTO THEATER**

While the healthcare and corporate world make up the large majority of the American culture of overwork, there is a specific glorification of overwork unique to the performance arts that is causing not only high rates of burnout but the kind of schedules that lead to broken families, lack of social life, or damaging self-care.<sup>12</sup>

Evaluating the livelihood and economics of the theater artists, they'd recognized that theater is a difficult business to break into, and that to make their full-time living in the performance arts, they rely heavily on their skills and networking. It is also a truism that they should be grateful for the immense luck that has befallen them that they are graced with the

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<sup>11</sup> Lung, Shirley. "Overwork and overtime" *mckinnelaw.iu.edu*. May 26, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Loar, Josh. "Overworked Staff and Performing Arts: Let's Not Pretend We're Okay." *TheatreArtLife*, 2 July 2019, [www.theatreartlife.com/technical/performing-arts-overworked-staff/](http://www.theatreartlife.com/technical/performing-arts-overworked-staff/).

careers they possess.<sup>13</sup> To have that opportunity, many feel that they should remain grateful and strive to work harder to maintain it. Afterall, according to Loar, he's been coming lately to the conclusion that his friends and colleagues in the business are more overworked and exhausted than not.

Obtaining a career in the arts is coupled with the struggles of maintaining income. Full-time living in a singular position with one performance arts company can often be a rarity for actors, directors, designers, stage managers, and other freelance artists due to time-sensitive contracts. One job may sign an artist for one month and another for six months. Thus, the issue with the lifestyle of a freelance artist is that it's associated with the uncertainties of job stability. Freelance artists aren't sure if they'll be able to work next month, so they're more likely to book themselves for a full month without a day off. It's not uncommon to hear directors or designers working on multiple projects at once to build their resume and financial gaining. The same can't really be said for stage managers. As one anonymous stage manager testify, "unlike designers, even occasionally directors, you can't stage-manage multiple projects at once... you have to be all in."<sup>14</sup> In addition to paying the water and electric bills, the rent varies in expenses by the cities fortunate to have lively theater and concert opportunities, yet those cities thriving in theater are often extremely expensive places to live.

Since most theatrical projects could be short-termed, and hiring is primarily based off of reputation, stage managers often rely job hunting to be on relationships and connections. These

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<sup>13</sup> Loar, Josh. "Overworked Staff and Performing Arts: Let's Not Pretend We're Okay." *TheatreArtLife*, 2 July 2019, [www.theatreartlife.com/technical/performing-arts-overworked-staff/](http://www.theatreartlife.com/technical/performing-arts-overworked-staff/).

<sup>14</sup> Tran, Diep. "How Theater Work Adds Up". *Americian Theater*. 24 January 2017. <https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/01/24/how-theatre-work-adds-up/>

reputations are based on the work ethic of a stage manager and the quality of skills they demonstrate on the job. A stage manager would want to be known as a skilled and knowledgeable worker who cares about his craft and who cares about the project. This could translate into hard working and easy to work with, all for the purpose of being potentially hired again. There's nothing wrong with this work ethic, but if not taken carefully, it can drive a person to neglect their own health. Is this type of behavior rewarded? Some folks think otherwise as this person commented on the *Overworked Staff and Performing Arts* article via Facebook Group:

- I try to keep in mind that if I dropped dead tomorrow, all of my success would be thrown out and my job would be posted before my obituary.

So not only can a short-termed job call for continual “life skills” management as a potential hire, it may promote the viewpoint that stage managers are not only expendable, but replaceable. The hurdles of breaking into the theater industry mixed with meeting the financial demands of living comfortably as well as maintaining a rising career in the profession goes hand-in-hand with begrudged compliance to an overwork nature to ensure no falling off the tracks.

### **THE SHOW MUST GO ON**

This is a popular and dangerous saying in the performing world. It can be traced to cirque acts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century if an animal got loose or a performer was injured, the cirque members would try to keep things going so that the crowd would not panic<sup>15</sup> because *it was a point of honor not to let the other players down by deserting them when no understudy is available*.<sup>16</sup> Honor plays a huge role for performers and their company. They act as one piece in the machinery and any missing part would affect the entire product. It would be visible to the

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<sup>15</sup> Rogers, James T. (1985). *The Dictionary of Cliches*. New York: Facts on File Publications.

<sup>16</sup> Partridge, Eric (1977). *Dictionary of Catch Phrases*. London: Routledge & Paul.

audience. They wouldn't want to disappoint their audience nor their company if the show had to stop because it would paint a negative image of their capabilities as a company.

The following is a testimony from Andy Lucien, an actor who's reevaluating his relationship with physically demanding theater and the phrase "the show must go on."

- Those words motivated me so much that despite being utterly unhappy and drenched in pain after every show of that production, I had believed, and had it ingrained in me, that the importance of the show was paramount. Any sacrifice I made for that or any show was in service of something noble, something greater than myself... On the surface my desire to keep pushing could be brushed off as male bravado. In service of my own ego. And maybe to some extent it was. It felt good to be able to make that run even though it was taking an injury and making it worse. I kept rehearsing, and performing, making sure we didn't miss any time. I did that until I couldn't. Until the pain literally went through my entire body... And then I performed some more. Was this for my own ego?... Maybe. Or maybe it was my latest act of self-sacrificial love to the theater.<sup>17</sup>

Stage managers also relate to this sense of pride in their work and refusal to feel defeated by internal forces. In a stage manager's role, there is a lot at stake in terms of maintaining a healthy rehearsal process to conserving a consistent run while also being consciously aware of the company's physical, mental, and emotional state. There's a lot of upkeep to follow with a production and it's often the stage manager's responsibility to ensure that the end product is well on its way. The smoothness of the production can be a reflection of the stage manager and their craft. If the production gets on its feet successfully then the stage manager can feel successful as well. But when the stage manager feels like they can't afford to slow down or put their own needs above the show's, then they feel like they had failed the show. The stage manager feels as if they must keep the show going at the expense of themselves. This leads into the definitions

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<sup>17</sup> Lucien, Andy. "Why I Broke Up With The American Theater." *The Lark*, The Lark Theater, 18 Dec. 2018, [www.larktheatre.org/blog/why-i-broke-american-theater/](http://www.larktheatre.org/blog/why-i-broke-american-theater/).

and assumptions of stage managers where collected responses share the sentiment to keep working despite difficulty.

### **JOB DESCRIPTIONS: THE AEA RULES**

***AEA definitions of a Stage Manager:***<sup>18</sup> (To reiterate from the disclaimer section, an Equity Stage Manager is not the only standard for being a stage manager, but these guidelines or definitions are in an official sourced text from Actors Equity Association. This union represents professional stage managers in the United States thus the list of SM duties below can be considered a seminal resource.)

- **A Stage Manager under Actors' Equity Contract is, or shall be obligated to perform at least the following duties for the Production to which s/he is engaged, and by performing them is hereby defined as the Stage Manager:**
- Shall be responsible for the calling of all rehearsals, whether before or after opening.
- Shall assemble and maintain the Prompt Book which is defined as the accurate playing text and stage business, together with such cue sheets, plots, daily records, etc., as are necessary for the actual technical and artistic operation of the production.
- Shall work with the Director and the heads of all other departments, during rehearsal and after opening, schedule rehearsal and outside calls in accordance with Equity regulations.
- **Assume active responsibility for the form and discipline of rehearsal and performance and be the executive instrument on the technical running of each performance.**
- Maintain the artistic intentions of the Director and the Producer after opening, to the best of his/her ability, including calling correctional rehearsals of the company when necessary and preparation of the Understudies, Replacements, Extras and Supers, when and if the Director and/or Producer declines this prerogative. Therefore, if an Actor finds him/herself unable to satisfactorily work out an artistic difference of opinion with the Stage Manager regarding the intentions of the Director and Producer, the Actor has the option of seeking clarification from the Director or Producer.
- Keep such records as are necessary to advise the Producer on matters of attendance, time health benefits or other matters relating to the rights of Equity members. The Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Managers are prohibited from the making of payrolls or any distribution of salaries.
- Maintain discipline as provided in the Equity Constitution, By-Laws and Rules where required, appealable in every case to Equity.
- Stage Manager duties do not include shifting scenery, running lights or operating the Box Office, etc.
- **The Council shall have the power from time to time to define the meaning of the words "Stage manager" and may alter, change or modify the meaning of Stage Manager as hereinabove defined.**

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<sup>18</sup> Actor's Equity. <http://www.cwu.edu/~web/callboard/documents/EquitySMDuties.pdf>

- The Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Managers are prohibited from handling contracts, having riders signed or initialed, or any other function which normally comes under the duties of the General Manager or Company Manager.
- The Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Managers are prohibited from participating in the ordering of food for the company.
- The Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Managers are prohibited from signing the closing notice of the company or the individual notice of any Actor's termination.

***Response:***

As bolded from the above definitions from AEA, the definition of a stage manager is spread out into various dos and don'ts along with vague understandings of what the job entails. The first bolded rule indicates that if someone were to perform the following tasks, then they are performing the role of a stage manager. It doesn't mean that this person is actually a stage manager, but they are doing tasks that are thought of as stage manager duties.

The second bolded rule asks for the person performing the role of stage manager to execute discipline and executive order for rehearsals and performances. How does this work in working with a director or producer? In a hierarchy of theatrical productions, it's usually the producer who have a lot of control of the company in terms of contractual holdings and results while the director is the leader or figurehead for rehearsals whose vision is the performance. How do stage managers balance these levels of leadership or power, and how do they discipline when they're supposed to manage?

The third bolded rule is the most specious as it completely negates the AEA-definition of a stage manager by removing any core beliefs. Like most paperwork, it is subject to change, giving no stable understanding of what a stage manager is.

In addition to these unclear definitions, there are certain guidelines that elaborate and prohibit certain tasks that a stage manager can do. Tasks that are allowed to do are those that stage managers are familiar with such as working with the director and designers in accordance



with Equity, creating a prompt book, and maintaining the show. Prohibited tasks include box office, scenic changes, salaries, etc. These prohibited tasks most likely are set by past experiences and concerns from stage managers and other unions regarding fair job distribution and to eliminate tasks that are better served by other departments. To the benefit of the stage manager, these prohibitions can be seen as helpful in creating non-overworking for stage managers.

### **JOB DESCRIPTIONS: THE REALITY**

*Definitions from Stage Managers:* <sup>19</sup> (In regard to the list of duties and lack of core definition from Equity, working stage managers in the business have created their own definitions based on their own experiences and called-on skills not mentioned from Equity.)

- There are so many definitions and roles and hats a stage manager wears. Don't know where to begin.
- An artistic facilitator who ensures that the production has all of its needs met and that the integrity of the production is the same on opening as closing.
- Very hard question. A person who must empathy AND logic to prioritize facilitation of any kind of event, experience, or process.
- **Ha. People don't like to define SMs (Equity hasn't for a decade).** I say the stage manager is (usually) the person in the rehearsal hall with the performers and director, taking notes and communicating the production needs to technicians, designers, and administration. During performance, we coordinate the technical aspects for the show, working to maintain the combined vision of the production, and maintain it as the performance run continues.
- What a question. The hub of communication. The person who looks out for everyone. The person who figures out how to say 'yes' as often as possible.
- Defining stage management is an entire can of worms! Basically and currently in my mind, a stage manager is someone who coordinates all artistic and technical elements of a production in rehearsal and performances, tasks which are completed through a variety of methods and include but are not limited to scheduling, running rehearsals, and running performances including calling cues and technical elements during performance.
- A person who uses empathy and logic to prioritize facilitation of any kind of event, experience, or process
- The conduit for information and the pilot of the ship
- Too long to explain. It's everything everyone else either doesn't want to do or can't do, and making sure everyone who can do what they do IS doing what they should be doing.
- The mother duck of the show

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<sup>19</sup> Ho, Dennis. "Stage Manager and Overwork". Questionnaire. October, 2019.

***Response:***

As we see from these examples of definitions, they don't match up with Equity's definition of a stage manager. For working stage managers, the job description goes beyond handling a book prompt or making sure that rehearsals/performances goes within Equity rules. The stage managers' definitions include providing an emotional awareness, facilitation, active communication, and leadership for the company. This difference between rules and reality shows that there is a gap in expectations and awareness for what stage management is. Whether this gap is created by AEA's ignorance or lack of SMs' raising recognition for themselves. However, that gap is what creates assumptions about the job.

***Assumptions made of Stage Managers:***<sup>20</sup>

- That we know everything, that we “control” everything, that we are incapable of being hurt, that we do not/cannot make mistakes
- From people within the industry: that we're mind readers. That we don't need to take breaks. That we're “on call” 24/7, or close to it. That we should be willing to “do whatever it takes” to make things happen. That we don't make an artistic contribution to the productions we work on. More often from people outside the industry: that we probably “really” want to do something else (like perform, direct, produce, etc.)
- We are willing to be the catch-all for any work other departments do not cover, that we always have our shit together.
- We can do anything, and our lives are only our work. The worst assumption I've heard regarding my job is that it is our job to “smile and say yes to everything the director wants”.
- They are naturally perfectionist, they happily work over hours to get it done properly and always lack sleep.
- Only women and gay men. Super helpful and will take on all the extra work.
- They must help the show succeed, even to the detriment of their own mental or physical capacity.
- That they make no mistakes, that they are harsh, that they can read minds, that they aren't human beings with feelings, that they aren't artistic.
- I believe there are lots of people who think that stage management is just the catch all for everyone's problems. On several occasions I've been asked to x problems that I've responded with “well that's why we pay a (ex) sound engineer”.

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<sup>20</sup> Ho, Dennis. “Stage Manager and Overwork”. Questionnaire. October, 2019.

- That we're superhuman. That we don't need breaks. That we can comprehend everything thrown at us in milliseconds. That days off don't apply to us.
- SMs know everything, SMs don't need to take breaks, SMs are responsible for everything (including making coffee and other hospitality).
- What we actually do versus what people want us to do.
- That they are bitter, that they are controlling and indispensable, that they are working 24/7, that they will always pick up the slack.

***Response:***

Judging from these assumptions that stage managers have heard from or experienced, there is a correlation to the overwork culture. Folks outside of stage management seem to have the impression that stage managers enjoy or are willing to take on more work than what is ordinarily required from them or that any type of extra work is welcomed and expected for stage managers to handle.

**DEMOGRAPHICS:**

When the self-created *Stage Managers and Overwork Survey*, started circulating in October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019 on various Facebook groups for stage managers, one of its original goals was to examine stage manager frustrations and opinions about the presence of overworking in the theater and its overall effect on the working stage manager. The survey was open to notes and suggestions to better the experience for the survey-takers and to be as inclusive as it can be. From there did the realization that the survey was acting biased towards American stage managers and leaned more towards those within the AEA union than non-union. This realization could not make it into the survey on time to include thoughts from stage managers in film, opera, or events or stage managers from AGMA, AGVA, Director's Guild, or SAG-AFTRA.

Seeing this is limiting the perspective of what a stage manager experiences, this project encourages the reader to examine the trends and consensus within the American AEA and non-

union community of stage managers. This project aims to show that many stage managers encounter similar challenges and that they do not have to face these obstacles alone.

From the *Stage Managers and Overwork Survey*, it has recorded responses from 79 stage managers. Participants were not required to answer every question beyond the age, ethnicity, and gender questions for demographic purposes.

- The age range from this group is as followed;

<b>Under 18 years old:</b> 5 out of 79, 6.3%	<b>18 years old – 24 years old:</b> 16 out of 79, 20.3%	<b>25 years old – 29 years old:</b> 18 out of 79, 22.8%
<b>30 years old – 34 years old:</b> 17 out of 79, 21.5%	<b>35 years old – 39 years old:</b> 11 out of 79, 13.9%	<b>40 years old – 44 years old:</b> 5 out of 79, 6.3%
<b>45 years old – 49 years old:</b> 3 out of 79, 3.8%	<b>50 years old – 54 years old:</b> 1 out of 79, 1.3%	<b>55 years old – 59 years old:</b> 2 out of 79, 2.5%
<b>60 years old – 64 years old:</b> 0 out of 79, 0%	<b>65 years old – 69 years old:</b> 1 out of 79, 1.3%	<b>70 years old – 74 years old:</b> 0 out of 79, 0%
<b>75 years old – 79 years old:</b> 0 out of 79, 0%		

- The ethnicity range from this group is as followed;

<b>Asian</b> 4 out of 79, 5.1%	<b>Black/African</b> 0 out of 79, 0%	<b>Caucasian</b> 68 out of 79, 86.1%	<b>Hispanic/Latinx</b> 4 out of 79, 5.1%
<b>Native American</b> 1 out of 79, 1.3%	<b>Pacific Islander</b> 0 out of 79, 0%	<b>Not Listed</b> 1 out of 79, 1.3%	<b>Prefer Not to Answer</b> 1 out of 79, 1.3%

- The gender range from this group is as followed;

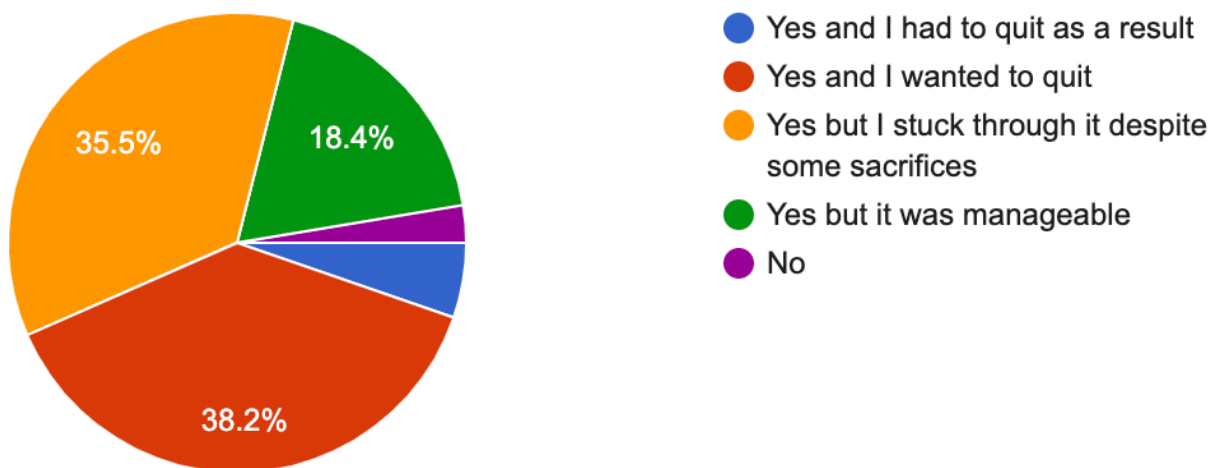
<b>Female</b> 56 out of 79, 70.9%	<b>Male</b> 16 out of 79, 20.3%	<b>Transgender Female</b> 0 out of 79, 0%	<b>Transgender Male</b> 1 out of 79, 1.3%
<b>Gender Non-Conforming</b>	<b>Not Listed</b>	<b>Prefer Not to Say</b>	

4 out of 79, 5.1%	1 out of 79, 1.3%	1 out of 79, 1.3%	
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There isn't enough data to argue that ethnicity, gender, or age are factors in determining if they add or alleviate the pressures of being overworked. Not to say that these factors should be ruled out, but further surveys for larger and multiple groups are required for substantial analysis in connecting them to the themes of this project.

Full text of the survey is included as an attachment. Some of the questions and results have been pulled from the survey to support this study.

***Figure 1: Number of SMs and their responses to distress in a show.***



***Participants were asked if they had experienced emotional or physical distress due to a particular project or show that they worked on.***

35.5% of responses have replied that they did experience distress but have completed the show with sacrifices made. These sacrifices could signify lack of social life, lack of food or sleep, or lack of support in the workplace. 38.2% of responses replied that they had thought about quitting due to the distress, but only 5.1% of the overall responses have quit. 18.4% have

said that their distress was manageable, and they were able to successfully run their shows. 3.8% of responses replied that they had not experience distress in their career.

Right now, due to the nature of this question, it is unclear whether this level of emotional or physical distress is common amongst a string of multiple shows that a stage manager has worked on or has just occurred on one or few times. However, the following comments from survey takers whom shared their stressful experiences as related to the above graph.

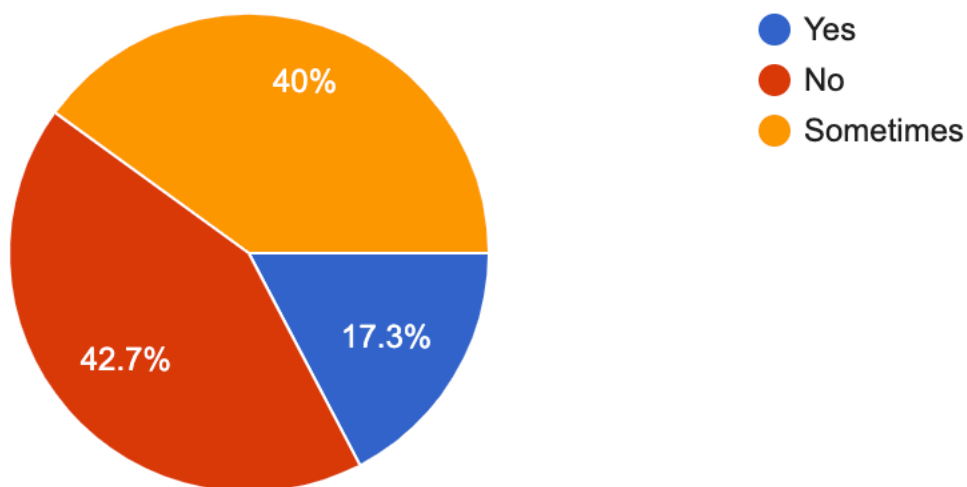
- The two times I've considered quitting was the result of other staff people treating me cruelly. There's no space for that in my life and I won't stand for it. The second time was compounded by the fact that the company refused to let me train a sub to cover 2 shows during my best friend's wedding so I was miserable and they had no respect for what is important to my life as a person.
- Unreasonable hours and lack of compensation. Ultimately confronted the producers and our team was retroactively paid for the intense rehearsal/remount period we went through.
- Tech team didn't show therefore I had to work two jobs during the project despite only being paid for one
- If they actually cared about people's lives and sanity, they would have hired another person so I didn't have to do two jobs. (Oh, and someone's nose got fractured because of an extension of this situation).
- That has varied greatly depending on the circumstances -- being a stage manager requires a lot -- a lot of brain space, a lot of patience, a lot of listening, a lot of talking, and a lot of thinking. The combination of people in the room, the high stakes environment, and the tone of the process can all affect stress levels.
- This has happened to me a few times. What it always boiled down to was lack of gratitude toward the work (and the extra work) I was doing. It also came down to the way that people related to each other- generally the people in question were putting the product over the well-being of their collaborators.
- I've had to take on numerous jobs within each show to make sure that things were getting done, and those things that go outside of the scope of stage management add on top of an already busy job and create a huge amount of stress. In addition, I am frequently doing multiple shows at once, and the demands of both add up in an incredibly stressful way.

As quoted from responses, these feelings of distress resulted from experiences of overworking in their productions. A few of these instances derived from not understanding the scope of what stage management is and how much pressure or tasks their company will put on their stage manager to accomplish. This leads to an overwork culture within the theater

community where members of the community are placing themselves in situations where they had to work beyond their normal capabilities which agitates stress or physical/mental discomfort. It is the assumptions that stage managers are willing to take on more than what is agreed upon their job description that stage managers are pressured to do so anyways as a result of an unclear definition of what a stage manager is.

Sometimes, this leads for some stage managers to join Equity as a way to protect themselves or establish their own “legitimacy” as a stage manager. As Equity states, it is an union that covers both stage managers and actors since they are often the members who stay with a production the longest. Despite that shared connection, there are disparities between the responses between actors and stage managers from the union’s perspective.

**Figure 2: Number of SMs and their opinions on the fairness of sharing a union with actors.**



**Participants are asked if they think sharing the same union as Actors accommodate their needs as stage managers as fairly or equal to the needs of actors.** Many participants shared opinions similar to the following unedited comments:

- Why would they be treated equally? The contracts are negotiated largely based on the actors, and then the stage managers are shoe-horned in because they are represented by

the same union. It doesn't always work, as I'm sure you'll hear from plenty of AEA stage managers. For myself, I operate internationally, so well beyond AEA jurisdiction.

- AEA is very unspecific and contradictory about what a Stage Manager is and is not allowed to do and there should be a more clear definition that does not contradict itself. Stage Managers should also be paid for the time that they are at the theatre working not just the time the actors are there.
- Fair treatment is not equal treatment. The jobs are very different.
- Just percentage-wise, there are always more actors at negotiations than stage managers, so we suspect our items are negotiated away or forgotten first. There should be more strict requirements for ASMs on more shows and contracts - ASMs should not be concessioned away. Housing should be more easily provided instead of offering contracts if stage managers are willing to say they are "local." Theatres often ignore the fact that we use our personal phones and laptops for our work - even if they provide these things they are not convenient for us to use. A regard for our boundaries around work - not expecting us to respond to everyone 24/7, or be the "bad guy" regarding aea rules or talking with the union.
- I do feel that because there are statistically more actors than stage managers, actors are the primary focus of union negotiations and work. Even looking in the Equity agreements, members are described as "Actors" instead of "Actors and Stage Managers." However, all members have work out of the rehearsal/performance room that they do: actors learn lines, stage managers do all sorts of things. So this is a loaded question! I don't think that needs of stage managers are neglected BECAUSE they share the same union with actors, but that it is an understandable ramification of the needs of a union that represents far more actors than stage managers.

### **INTERVIEW DISCLAIMER:**

The following excerpts are derived from notes obtained during a live interview with a stage manager who shall remain anonymous. This person declined to a recorded interview.

Please take the upcoming segment as further commentary about the disparities between professional actors and stage managers, who share the same union: Actors Equity Association. Many of the interviewee's comments highlight the disparities that AEA rules favor actors and leave stage managers in the sub-par position with respect to similar concerns. The segment will also include references to actual AEA rules or guidelines to further support this argument.



### **INTERVIEW:**

Equity actors are compensated for bringing in their articles of clothing or props, yet the same cannot be the same for stage managers. Actors are protected and provided. Though stage managers are usually never asked to bring props, they are expected to bring their own black clothing for their work backstage. It can be viewed as a uniform to wear while on work, similar to an actor wearing their costume. However, actors' costumes are handled by the costume department (or in even lower contracts, the stage management) while stage management's or crew's uniforms are not. If actors and stage managers are in the same union, why does the clothing rule apply only to actors, but not stage managers? This is an example about how the language in AEA ruling favors one over the other. Though there is an argument to be made that stage managers and crew are not meant to be seen on stage so the comparison to wearing crew blacks to an actor's costume could not be made. Plus, if crew blacks were added to the costume department's duties, then the costume department will also have to be paid higher for a larger quantity of work.

As theatrical projects are getting more complicated and elaborate, it's for the stage manager's best interest to keep themselves updated in technological items and advances. Nowadays, it's common for stage managers to have a Mac laptop, smart phone, and computer programs such as Final Draft, FileMaker, Dropbox, etc. The issue with this, is that stage managers are not given such equipment and are assumed to bring their own. Stage managers could ask general management for such devices or tools, but depending on the level of production, their requests could be denied. If a stage manager is not financially capable of purchasing these items on their own, then the level of work could increase for them. The general company can usually supply typical office supplies such as paper, writing utensils, printers, etc. For actors, they are not required to bring anything but their bodies and skills. But organizational skills, script management, documentation, etc, are skills that need external tools. If the company isn't willing to pay for these necessary materials, then it falls unto the stage manager to either continue asking for them or provide for themselves.

The duties of a Stage Manager are not defined in the rule book and are not updated to today's standards. It is a deliberate decision made by the union to not get too specific. Shows are much more technical than they were 10 years ago. The marginalizing that happen either through the eyes of our producers or management and further by the union not having our backs can cause frustrations for stage managers. Over the years, with regarding to stage manager contracts, those contracts have been bartered away for actors' gain or other issues. There's a rule for Stage managers to be present at all rehearsals. A loophole to this is having a choreographer or swing be on an SM rider. This takes away jobs from SMs to protect the actors. They're great for the choreography but they don't have the other skills or tasks of SMs. You have to bring in a Sub for an SM if they leave the building.

SMs rarely call equity due to consequences. They instead try to accommodate. There's no one to protect Stage Managers like they protect Actors. We would talk to directors or producers about the actors' contracts, but no one does that for us. SMs become marginalize within our community because we don't want to be labelled as troublemakers or difficult. You don't want to be part of the problem. You want to be a problem solver. Be a team player, be complacent, and don't bring in Subs because of money. Despite the money bump for SMs compared to actors, the money between SMs and actors is still pretty close. The huge disparity is the number of hours worked between SMs and actors. The rehearsal calendar is always set to be careful over how many hours an actor works, but not the stage manager. And only when actors get overtime does

the stage manager gets overtime. Understudy rehearsals need SMs, so you do get overworked but not always.

Even under an ASM contract, that person could be just be labeled as an ASM but they're really an understudy. That's ridiculous. An SM team is under restriction for having only two or three ASMs for a musical, but if all three ASMs have busy tracks then they can't afford to be missing or sick. It's not a complete team. You need a 4<sup>th</sup> ASM who's not going to be going onstage because that's where their true focus lies.

This is our union. What should happen is that the union should back us up. We are 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens in our union. We should be represented in our union. It should be the same treatment they give to actors. This is part of the territory. We need to be there as stage managers.

***End of Interview.***

## **AEA SCHEDULING TIME BETWEEN ACTORS AND STAGE MANAGERS**

This portion will examine the disparities in work hours between actors and stage managers. In overworked environments, it isn't simply the amount of work that's being piled on but how long it takes to accomplish them and whether or not the worker is being compensated for their time spent.

Using the AEA Basic Showcase Code<sup>21</sup>, let's compare the work hour ratios in a straight play rehearsal schedule between actors and stage managers. The maximum rehearsal period of a straight play production shall not exceed a total of 128 hours scheduled over a maximum of five consecutive weeks with a limited 32 hours per week. Actors and Stage Managers shall rehearse no more than six hours on any given day except the final week of rehearsal. These are the main points in scheduling in regard to actors and stage managers. To set up this comparison, let's say this schedule has listed Tuesday through Friday from 12pm to 6pm with Saturday and Sunday from 12pm to 4pm. Monday is the day off. This weekly schedule repeats for 4 weeks including tech to reach a total of 128 hours maximum.

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<sup>21</sup> Actor's Equity Association. *Basic Showcase Code (New York City)*. January 22, 2018.

All actors are called to all rehearsals within the allotted times for this production and according to the showcase code under Actors' responsibilities, they must be prompt in attendance. There's no additional rule for stage managers. From reading these rules alone, it comes with the appropriate expectations that when an actor is called at 12pm for rehearsal and excused at 4 or 6pm, so will the stage manager. However, that is rarely the case. What the showcase code fails to realize is the prep time and rehearsal room set up that a stage manager takes upon themselves to do prior every rehearsal. Part of the stage manager's responsibility in rehearsals is to set up the room before the actors and even the director arrives. This includes sweeping the room, laying out the props, updating the callboard, etc. Generally, this requires the stage manager to arrive an hour prior. Post-rehearsal is similar. Once the actors are excused, the stage manager is responsible for returning the space to neutral and discussing the next rehearsal with the director. Let's say this will also take another hour. Just daily prework and cleanup alone, it's an extra 12 hours a week in addition to the max 32 hours of a weekly rehearsal. This would add up to 48 hours in addition to the 128 hours of a total production, equating to 176 hours required from a stage manager. This doesn't include production meetings, phone calls, email exchanges, or outside director conversations that stage managers have to include themselves in.

Following this example are more comments from the *Stage Manager and Overwork* survey to support this disparity in hours:<sup>22</sup>

- "AEA is very unspecific and contradictory about what a Stage Manager is and is not allowed to do and there should be a more clear definition that does not contradict itself. Stage Managers should also be paid for the time that they are at the theatre working not just the time actors are there."
- "Actor's workdays are confined to rehearsal hours set, stage managers do not have that kind of cap and are often working an hour or two before rehearsal and an hour after."
- Having to justify my overtime on a limited hour contract because "the actors were done at 10:30, why are you saying you worked till midnight?"

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<sup>22</sup> Ho, Dennis. "Stage Manager and Overwork". Questionnaire. October, 2019.

## POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES TO SPEAKING UP:

This was one comment from a stage manager regarding not being paid to attend production meetings.<sup>23</sup>

- If you speak up, then they could say that they don't need you if it's going to cost them money. Then you'll have to fight to attend and get the information you need.

For stage managers, it's vital for them to be informed and updated on the process the production team has made and what still has to be accomplished. Yet, to be challenged and not be recognized for time spent outside of rehearsals is a frequent challenge that stage managers have to advocate for themselves to be compensated. The question then asks; How should hours be properly addressed? In the corporate world, the norm is that people would work on an hourly wage. The same goes for production and general managers to theater technicians. However, for stage managers, their contracts signed them up for a solid salary for the entire process. How then could a stage manager ask or negotiate for overtime? Could a stage manager rely on Equity to help?

From the same interview recently given, she discloses a story about an associate of her who used to sub for a musical. This sub was on hire in case of emergencies or vacation time and was not working for this musical on a regular schedule. This sub was called within less than 24 hours' notice on multiple random occasions. She felt disgruntled by the scheduling and mismanagement of her work hours. She took action by calling Equity to ask if this company's behavior was appropriate. After the call, Equity contacted the sub's company for further details about their scheduling process. Despite Equity stated that an anonymous caller made a

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<sup>23</sup> Ho, Dennis. "Stage Manager and Overwork". Questionnaire. October, 2019.

complaint, the company quickly figured out who it was. Thus, instead of addressing the sub about her issues toward their scheduling, they immediately let her go.

This story serves to further the notion that stage managers don't have safeguards or protections as they thought they have in their workplace. Despite being in an union, the company a stage manager works for can still disregard their position as a respectable employee and fire them to uphold their misbehaviors. Because of this consequence of calling Equity, the next stage manager that is hired to sub will not complain to avoid being fired. If such a case of overwork arises, the stage manager will take compulsory overwork, a willingness form of overworking to avoid trouble. This creates complacency within the work environment, and this creates a higher workload and expectation for stage managers that will continue to cycle forward.

***Response:***

Equity seeks to foster the art of live theatre as an essential component of society and advances the careers of its members by negotiating wages, improving working conditions and providing a wide range of benefits, including health and pension plans.<sup>24</sup> With that mission stated and as stated by the interview, survey questions, and examples, it appears that Equity hasn't satisfied nor recognized the imbalance it has maintaining its two groups of artists; actors and stage managers. While Equity stands as a reputable union and protection clause for its members, it has ways to go about improving its recognition of stage managers, creating fairness in treatment between stage managers and actors (not in terms of given everyone the same rules, but instead enforcing rules and guidelines that solves or benefits both sides' specific needs), and most of all, providing a safer confidentially agreement for stage managers to report or ask questions.

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<sup>24</sup> Actor's Equity. <https://www.actorsequity.org/>

## SHOULD STAGE MANAGERS JOIN THE UNION?

It depends on the stage manager themselves and how they want to pursue in their career.

Reiterating the disclaimer of this paper, the survey group didn't mention stage managers in opera, events, television, or outside the United States, where Equity has no status. Therefore, to be a stage manager, being a part of AEA is not required. There are plenty of avenues to pursue stage management.

- (Assumption) that if you're not AEA, you're non-union (I'm AGMA). Also that if you're not AEA, that you don't know anything (I've been offered my Equity Card 3 times, I declined the position for different reasons each time unrelated to getting my card).<sup>25</sup>

An equity card doesn't guarantee the quality of the stage manager just as it doesn't guarantee the quality of an actor. As in all fields, there are varying degrees of experience and talent. There's an argument to be made for stage managers to aim to be on a union contract to ensure protections. Equity cannot require anyone to join, but companies and producers could be encouraged to afford the non-equity stage managers the protections of scheduling and working conditions that the union mandates.

- With the lower tier/smaller contracts, there would be longer hours and less help allotted but with the higher the contract, the more protection you have as a stage manager.<sup>26</sup>

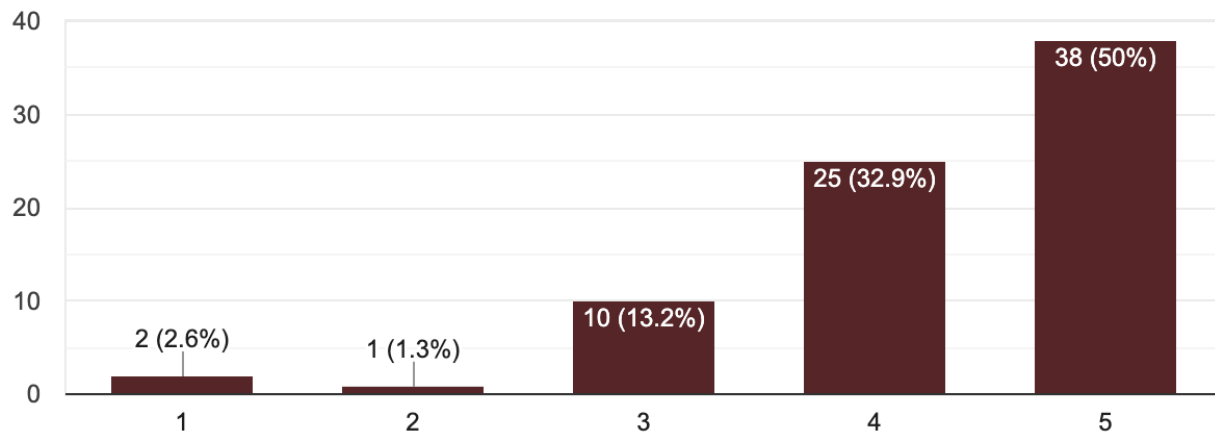
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<sup>25</sup> Ho, Dennis. "Stage Manager and Overwork". Questionnaire. October, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Ho, Dennis. "Stage Manager and Overwork". Questionnaire. October, 2019.

## DEMOGRAPHICS (CONT.)

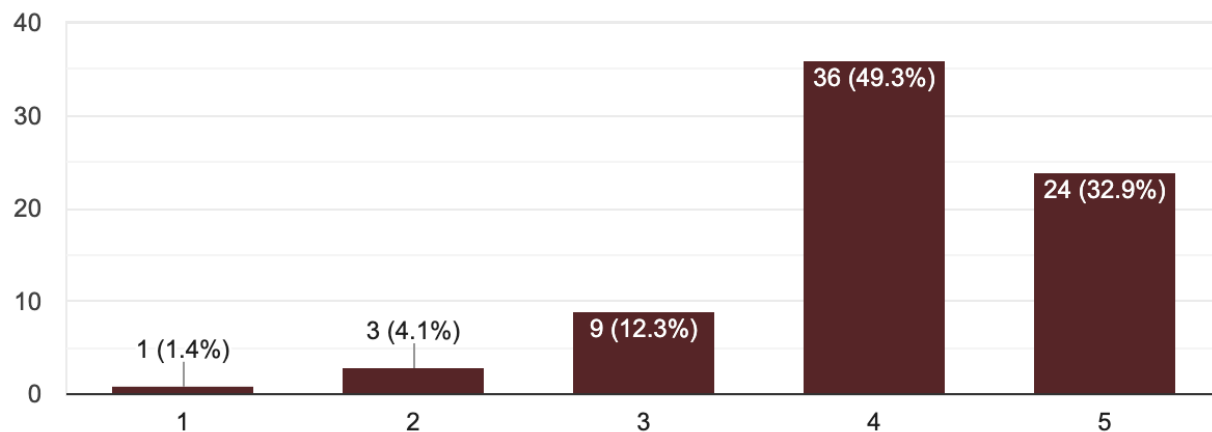
**Figure 3: Number of SMs who often take their work home.**



**Participants are asked how often they take their work home instead of leaving it at the theater or rehearsal space. 1 equates to never and 5 equates to always.**

Similar to actors who would take the time to take at home to memorize their lines, stage managers would take their book home to revisit blocking notations and script edits. In addition, stage managers would do meetings, phone calls, and emails outside of rehearsal hours. Unlike the corporate world where an office employee could leave his desk and work at this place of employment, stage managers would still carry their work with them to home to keep themselves and their materials updated with the production.

**Figure 4: Number of SMs who take up more work than anticipated.**



**Participants are asked how often they find themselves adding more responsibilities than what they had originally agreed. 1 being not at all to 5 being all the time.**

From the showcase code in its definition of a stage manager, the stage manager shall not be required to perform any duties not normally regarded as the function of a stage manager. They shall be expected to perform at least the following duties; calling rehearsals in accordance with the rules and regulations of AEA, assemble and maintain the prompt book, and be the executive instrument in the technical running of each performance and maintaining discipline during rehearsals and performance. The stage manager shall not be required to perform the following duties unless agreed upon by both the stage manager and producer prior to signing the signature page; food order and preparation, stagehands/house management/box office duties, laundry or dry cleaning, payment distributions, or janitorial/custodial/building maintenance work/securing or locking any part of the theatre or backstage areas.

Depending on the contract that a stage manager is signed on for, their list of duties can vary and can be discussed with the producer. With language such as “at least the following duties” or “unless agreed upon”, the stage manager could find themselves taking upon extra tasks they haven’t anticipated themselves doing.



Excerpts from comments made in response to the “Performing Arts and Overworked Staff: Let’s Not Pretend” article via Facebook Group.

- SMs being asked (without thinking) to do something that falls under company management or admin, or locking up the building... the list goes on.
- (under a LOA LORT contract) ... most recent experience – no ASM until tech. all custodial duties were mine... taping on own two areas.
- (under a SPT4 contract) get meal tickets to everyone, clean up coffee cups, put everything away because there’s going to be an event or class in the room, find out why an actor hasn’t gotten paid, make sure someone can pick up a designer from the train station. Make sure the dressing rooms have bins for the actors stuff because we have to put it all up on shelves so the makeup class that’s in there after the matinee doesn’t move anything. And often – find or make the props.
- (under NEAT contract) Bad two-show / rep turnaround is my most recent example. AEA SMs and ASMs on both shows in rep ended up taking on unpaid additional duties to make the changes overs happen.
- When you’re asked to do something that’s not in your job description. Stage managers are asked to absorb responsibilities from other departments into their job description.
- We were working so hard to fulfil the duties we had no skills or knowledge for that we were dropping the ball on things we should have been able to do in our sleep.

### **STORY DISCLAIMER:**

The following is separate conversation with a different stage manager who shall remain anonymous. This conversation is very informal and more of a retelling of an experience she had working on a show where she is hired as an associate director and not as a production stage manager. This excerpt serves as another example of how even someone who didn’t sign on as a PSM could still be asked to be one, thus overworking and overstepping her boundaries.

### **STORY:**

She is present for most of rehearsals alongside her director and her production stage manager. She expects to stay within the realm of her job as an Assistant Director, but it is no secret that she is an experienced stage manager. The producers know this as well. As the team progress further into rehearsals, the PSM for that production didn’t demonstrate strong stage management skills in terms of communication or leadership. For their rehearsal reports, they didn’t explain the needs or updates of the show clearly. The lack of clarity in the rehearsal reports didn’t get any better despite critiques from the team, so the PSM asks the AD if she could take a look at the reports before sending. Being a generous person, the AD agreed but after a few rehearsal reports, she ends up becoming a ghost writer for all of the reports. This continues until tech week when the PSM is required to demonstrate strong leadership and communication.

During tech, the PSM couldn't give clear notes or directions to the backstage crew on how to do the scenic transitions and is delaying valuable time in tech. Frustrated with the process, the producers ask the AD if she is willing to talk to the crew and give them orders instead of the PSM giving them. Since the AD is also being frustrated with the tech process, she agrees. She ends up running half of tech for the crew while the PSM runs tech with the designers.

In a casual tone with another team member, the AD talks about how the producers and PSM had asks her to do part of the PSM's job during this production process. In disbelief, her team member asks if she had obviously asked for a pay raise or change in contract.

Bewilderedly, the AD said no and that she hadn't even thought of it. Her team member responds that she needs to recognize that she is doing much more than what's required for an AD let alone doing someone else's job for them. Her team member encourages her to either stop what she's doing beyond AD work or request a change in contract with a higher pay.

The AD follows her team member's advice and is easily stipend for her extra efforts, but she is baffled that she had never thought to ask for more money in the first place. She tolerates herself for doing another person's job because she had so much experience than them. Yet, it is still not her place to do so, and furthermore, it isn't right for the PSM and producers to ask her to.

### ***Response:***

As shown from Figures 3, 4, and the story, stage managers have a full plate when accomplishing the tasks within the boundaries of their job description (how loosely defined it may be) without being asked to assist or take care of another department's job. Yet the same occurrence happens amongst stage managers, they are asked to do more or are expected to do so. How is this behavior within our community still ongoing? Have stage managers resist this culture of overworking to no avail or do they content with it?

### **OVERWORK CULTURE IS PERSISTENT:**

If exhaustion and burnout are so common in theatrical business, why is there persistence in pretending that is not the case? In an overwork culture, workers themselves contribute to this cultural norm by putting more value on their paid endeavors to establish the legitimacy of their jobs.<sup>27</sup> This relates back to **The Show Must Go On** section where stage managers face an internal conflict as to whose needs have to be taken care of first; the person working or the

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<sup>27</sup> Mirchandani, K. (2000). The best of both worlds and cutting my throat: Contradictory images of home-based work. *Qualitative Sociology*, 23, 159-182.

production they're working for. Stage managers in the current environment of theater encounter the need to work during breaks or give longer hours because it is necessary to show that they are serious about their careers. They then participate in compulsory overwork as a result.

Excerpts from comments made in response to the "Performing Arts and Overworked Staff: Let's Not Pretend" article via Facebook Group provides some personal context in this conflict in an emotional sense.

- There seems to be a weirdly macho attitude towards exhaustion in the performing arts, we wear it as an odd badge of pride. Bragging about how overworked we are is a one-ups game – I can endure more, so I must be more hardcore than you. If your peers are competitive, working a 'normal' or 'casual' work speed will make you look like a slacker. This is parallel to the nature of the job, the competitiveness.
- Knowing that although that you are being dramatically overworked and not compensated for your OT, but the shops don't have a union contract and are being more overworked for less money with fewer protections. That guilt can do a lot to stop us too.
- We try to work hard to get the attention of the Artistic Director or Company Manager.
- When that pride for having survived the macho overwork to make things work hits, try to remember that you have taught the producer that much work can be accomplished by a too small an allotment of people/time/money. They don't care that you just squeaked it out and are bruised and exhausted. They see done and that becomes their new baseline.
- If I don't do everything that's needed to get done (SPT4 with college students for all but director, designer, and TD positions) it doesn't get done and I don't get the next contract. Really difficult with 2 week rehearsal periods especially with new plays or big casts or very tech heavy shows – but I gotta work to keep health insurance.

How can this community of stage managers solve these issues to create positive change in our environments? Otherwise, what else can this research collectively gain by identifying how common this experience seems to be? Is there a remedy available?

### **TEMPORARY SOLUTIONS:**

Individuals craft different strategies for dealing with this stress and exhaustion. Some turn to therapy to have someone to talk with, but that can become expensive immediately. Some discuss their problems with their families and friends, which can be helpful in the short term, but

can also place a burden on them. Others may turn to heavy smoking, drinking, taking drugs, or other self-destructive habits to numb the pain or cope with the anxiety.

On a lighter alternative, others turn to casual activities and hobbies to take their worries off of work and on personal enjoyment. These can involve working out, going out to museums, hanging out with friends and family, baking, etc. Whatever is best for the individual to relax and take their mind off of work can only benefit them.

A response to the “Overworked Staff and Performing Arts: Let's Not Pretend We're Okay” via Facebook group puts it nicely with a stage manager’s 6-out-7-workday-schedule.

- The theater schedule is what we signed up for and we have to maximize the time we have with friends and family. We must protect our one Day Off and give that one day of our life outside of the job.

Though these temporary solutions steer the stage manager’s mind away from work, it doesn’t directly affect it. In terms of handling stress and exhaustion in the work environment, the Facebook Group has suggested the following:

- Establish availability hours for your line of communication.
- Don’t respond to emails after a certain time and determine if certain messages need an immediate response or not.
- It’s important to create a division between your personal life and your work life. Good business means protecting it from other aspects of life. Taking time off is for the sake of returning fresher to work.
- Determine if the entire SM team need to come in at the same time every morning or stay after rehearsal until everyone has finished their work.

### **ACTION STEPS:**

“Talking is a good start, but just talking to families and therapists isn’t going to change the industry. Conversations need to start amongst each other, and not just, as is so often the case, in the alley outside the stage door sharing a smoke, or after hours at the bar. These conversations need to be inside the theaters, concert halls, production meetings, season planning, and executive boards. Stage managers need to evaluate the industry and ask why the arts – a disciplinary field

known for attracting sensitive and empathic souls – has devolved into a business where basic human needs can be unmet, and they're supposed to remain silent about it."<sup>28</sup> Stage managers should realize that they could be expendable. It's up to them whether they will endure or reject this level of devotion to the overwork nature and culture. Comments below are taken from the "Overworked Staff and Performing Arts: Let's Not Pretend We're Okay" via Facebook group.

- I think what we need is strength. Forgive the sweeping generalization, but stage managers are much better at taking care of others than we are ourselves. If we identify common issues and themes, we're more likely to be galvanized into action to stand up for ourselves (because it means performing an act of care for OTHER stage managers). Bucking the status quo is a crux of the labor movement. The first step to that? Sharing stories: war wounds, horror stories, bright spots. All of them.
- Write to your rep, even if you wait until the contract is over. Say that the show was way outside the scope of the contract, that you worked these many hours over the allowance. The union doesn't know everything unless they are made aware, and when the reps are negotiating these SPTs and LOAs they can't help if they don't know what's going on.
- Producers need to plan better and capitalize better. The rest of us need to quit enabling them by giving ourselves and our talent away because we love what we do. That love can turn sour quickly which leaves stage managers to abandon their careers. Document everything and the hours being put into it. Send a letter to the Rep after the fact to let them know about stuff that doesn't necessarily show up on a schedule, such as switching between rehearsal spaces and having to re-tape and transport props and furniture each time. You can even write that the hour limitations under the contract meant that you can't even attend all the rehearsals without incurring overtime, or that your normal show duties mean that you're killing yourself. Notices like these will help them next time they are negotiating a contract or deciding whether or not to grant concessions.
- The answer lies in our leaders and boards. Our industry has long suffered a lack of focus on organizational culture and sound HR practices. We absolutely need to start focusing on creating places where there is a pride to come to work instead of just showing up to call or being on contract. The change has to start at the top. Our new generation of executive, artistic, development, producing leaders are going to have to take the reign and commit themselves to pushing for policies and structures that encourage a focus on work environment, and not just the show must go on.

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<sup>28</sup> Loar, Josh. "Overworked Staff and Performing Arts: Let's Not Pretend We're Okay." *TheatreArtLife*, 2 July 2019, [www.theatreartlife.com/technical/performing-arts-overworked-staff/](http://www.theatreartlife.com/technical/performing-arts-overworked-staff/).

## **ACTIONS DONE IN REALITY:**

With the above comments made, can such action be done in reality? In recent events in 2019, the evident is yes. Since the Lab Agreement is created, the landscape for show development has changed drastically. Creative contributions and the demands placed on artists have risen exponentially, but members are still earning the same weekly minimum salary on the Lab Agreement as they were 11 years ago. Equity in seeking a new Lab Agreement with Broadway League to improve the weekly salaries, recognizes creative contributions and includes profit participation and puts an end to the days when the Lab Agreement has abused and used as a substitute for rehearsal time that belongs on a production contract.<sup>29</sup> The strike branded “Not a Lab Rat” is the first one from the nation’s union for stage actors and stage managers in decades and has lasted for 33 days. After which, the union locks a win and a new contract for developmental lab productions in New York City.<sup>30</sup>

Under the new agreement, three tiers for development productions are articulated. The first tier, which mandates that projects go no more than 30 hours a week, allow actors to have the script in hand, will pay \$550 per week with benefits. Tier two, with similar stipulations, will pay \$900 per week with benefits and offers contingent compensation under various conditions and stipulations. In tier three, \$1,250 per week with benefits and a percentage share of net profits once the show recoups 110 percent of the initial investment.

Not only has this been an improvement for working conditions for actors but for stage managers as well. Members of a community (such as Equity) have banded together to address

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<sup>29</sup> #NotALabRat. *Action Network*. <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/notalabrat/>

<sup>30</sup> Ates, Alex. “Equity + Broadway League End ‘Lab Rat’ Strike”. *BACKSTAGE*. February 12, 2019. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/equity-broadway-league-end-lab-rat-strike-67180/>

problem of overwork within a specific level of production and raise their concerns with those who have the power and influence over the work environment. Such a feat should not be overlooked and can be used as encouragement for remaining issues at hand.

### **RECOGNITION/CONCLUSION:**

Stage managers need to recognize that they themselves are a precious resource that can be depleted quickly if not careful. How to protect themselves in a work environment is deciding whether they are in a healthy environment. Factors that contribute to career satisfaction included; pride in their work and with people whom they respect, mutual respect from company members who see them as vital, and the eagerness of potential future work with the same company. As long as the stage manager's boundaries and time are respected, then their workload won't be overwhelming. If for some reason, the boundaries are crossed, then conversations are required as well as compensation to make up for its effects on the livelihood of the stage manager.

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